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"He gathered the girl up and turned to the pair of flickering, beckoning lights that indicated the staircase leading up out of the court. 'Up the staircase!' she commanded."



stretched arms down the length of the long chamber, caught the glimmer of moonlight at the edges of the hanging carpet, and re-entered the alcove.

The young man was standing as she had left him. He looked at her, but did not speak.

Astarete leaned against the wall, extending one arm along it, palm downward.

"The soldier... have gone," she said. "They will not come here. One of them spoke to me. I had to promise that I would meet him to-morrow night or he would have searched for you and found you. But I will not meet him! I hate him worse than Valerius! He kissed me. Ugh!"

A twitching shudder passed over her.

"He—kissed you?"

It was as though she had casually mentioned the violation of a sanctuary.

Astarete had closed her eyes for an instant as she shuddered under her strong disgust. They opened and encountered directly the eyes that were steady as those of an archer who draws his bow against a lion.

In the diffused moonlight his face was clear to her. A peculiar thrill, honey-sweet, struck through the girl. Her senses, spurred by the excitement of the feast and by the passion of Valerius, panted for realization.

The face in the moonlight might have been that of a worshiper kneeling with extended arms before an enshrined divinity.

"He is very handsome," said the quick whisper of Astarete's consciousness, and the honey-sweet thrill struck through her.

"You are more beautiful than anything on earth—more wonderful than a miracle. When I followed you this morning it was as though I was drawn by a cord. I came here to-night because I knew that it would be impossible for me to sleep until I had seen you again."

"The abominations of this place cannot touch you—any more than the Philistines were permitted to violate the ark of God. If you should come face to face with a lion in the wilderness he would turn aside from the path and crouch before you like a chastised dog. I have no right to be here—to look at you—yet I cannot go."

There was a ring of utter sincerity in the rapid words. The face in the moonlight was that of the young worshiper upon his knees who is aware, in spite of his pas-

By **Dulcie Deamer**

ionate reverence, that his divinity is capable—however remotely—of granting the unimaginable bliss of union.

Astarete uttered nothing. Her lips were a little apart. Her eyes had mingled with the eyes of the young man at the moment when she opened them after her involuntary shudder.

She seemed to be drawn down a smooth, swift current to the lip of an inevitable plunge—or was it that she was drawing him as the white moon draws the depths of the sea?

Nether was aware of any actual movement toward the other, yet, in a breathless silence, their lips met.

Astarete's smooth arms were about David's neck. They were locked together in the shattered moonlight that looked with a level silver eye through the cris-crossing lattice-work.

The unconceivable had happened. The miracle had taken place—the divinity had descended from her shrine and given herself to the arms of her devotee.

David had felt that if he could embrace her feet he would touch the very summit of his desire, yet now he held her as he had held no woman all his life, taking the honey of her lips, that were cool as a flower. It had been irresistible—involuntary.

Astarete clove to the young man instinctively, unquestioning, thirsty for caresses. She had received and returned his kisses wordlessly for some moments before he spoke.

"I should kiss your feet—yet you have given me your lips."

His voice was unsteady, and it had deepened.

"You shall not kiss my feet—a dog might do that! I am Astarete. I was only brought here this morning. What is your name?"

"I am called David. Since I saw you this morning I have neither eaten nor slept. You looked at me three times when I followed you from the market. Am I—am I anything to you?"

"Oh—yes," said Astarete, her perfectly curved lips close to him. "I am sure I love you."

David's arms tightened about her. He kissed her mouth again. Then a barely perceptible pause, and then—involuntarily, as it seemed—he had twice kissed her shoulder.

Astarete drew a quick, caught-breath between her teeth. She was held now as closely as Valerius had held her.

Passion swept through David as a wave of the sea sweeps up a shelving beach to the highest tide-mark, and beyond.

"I love you—I worship you! I—I want you!"

His own voice was strange to him. It would have sounded stranger to Cymon, to his mother, to Rama.

An inconsiderable human noise began and ended somewhere near at hand—the clat-clat of a sandal, the grunting of a spear-butt, or perhaps the protest of a turning hinge.

"You—you must go," whispered Astarete. "You must go now. They must not find you here. If they find you they will kill you!"

"And you? Am I to leave you here?"

"I don't know. I—I would rather go with you."

"If you desire to go, I will go; if you remain, I will remain. You are my life!"

Astarete clung to him.

"Let us go now. I know the best way."

To Be Continued Next Sunday.

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Continued from Preceding Page.

Then a little break, and then the footsteps of the thirteenth. They approached, came level with the drawn curtains, paused.

Astarete held her breath. The curtains were jerked apart, the yellow light of a lantern fell upon her face. Involuntarily she moved her head, looking upward.

A half-breed soldier in gilt trappings and with a short Roman sword at his flank stood between the parted curtains.

"Hullo!" he said, "are you the girl that the man we're looking for carried off?"

Astarete blinked at the lantern light. She moistened her lips, which were a little dry.

"Yes. He—he heard the guard coming and he cast me down here. Then he escaped along the gallery. I do not know which door he went through—I was stunned."

The man raised his lantern, seeming to scrutinize the place.

"Umph! I'll take a look round here all the same," he said.

Astarete half raised herself suddenly from the floor. He went along the gallery."

In her voice there was an imperative, arresting note. She had raised one hand as though to check any advance. The light of the lifted lantern revealed her fully.

There was a moment of two of silence.

"Strike me blind! I'd carry you off myself, Venus, if I'd half a chance."

He set the lantern on the floor and went down on one knee beside Astarete, bringing his face close to hers. He was pock-marked, wide across the jaws, and with evil black eyes that held a devil.

"Meet me to-morrow night an hour after sunset behind the guard-room and I won't search this place. But if you don't come I'll get even with you. Venus—I'll get you scourged! Will you meet me?"

"Yes," said Astarete. "Yes."

"That's right. Play me fair and I'll do the same by you."

His hand fell on her, closing upon her arm, tightening so that she winced ever so slightly. She did not shrink or lower her eyes.

Obediently the subtle, untaught instincts of her womanhood raised her face a trifle, giving him a half veiled, liquid look. In the next moment his mouth was upon hers.

It was a brutal kiss, infinitely coarser than any that she had received from Valerius. Her whole being shrieked out against it, but she did not strain away or seek to turn her face.

Footsteps sounded in the gallery. Still holding her the man raised his head.

"That was a good one, Venus. I'll tell 'em I've beaten this covert through and through. We'll be good friends, you and I."

He released her, picked up the lantern, stepped out into the gallery, and drew the curtains. The sandalled feet of the soldiers made a measured tramping upon the staircase as they descended.

Astarete lay prostrate upon the cold marble for some moments. She writhed dumbly, rubbing her clenched fists against her pillaged lips. Rage and disgust possessed her. But she had achieved her purpose.

Presently she rose up. The place was entirely dark for she had blown out the lamp.

She went carefully with out-

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